

REVIEWS

THEATRE

Theatre for the moment: addressing racism, imperialism and colonialism in the *National Theatre at Home* series, broadcast on youtube during the Covid lockdown.

The following article reviews three of the plays that were broadcast on YouTube between March and July 2020 as part of the UK's National Theatre at Home series. They all tackle themes of racism, colonialism and imperialism in thought-provoking and innovative ways, and resonate strongly with the current moment in light of the resurgence of the Black Lives Matter movement.

Regardless of the degree to which countries were “locked down” during the pandemic, one area that was hit particularly hard everywhere as a result of the health crisis was the arts and culture sector. In most countries, large-scale cultural events, including the Edinburgh Fringe Festival and the Venice Architecture Biennale, were cancelled or postponed indefinitely, while countless museums, performance venues and cinemas closed their doors (in some cases permanently) to visitors. In order to remain financially afloat, many arts organisations across the world turned to online platforms. One of the most high-profile of these forays into the virtual realm was the *National Theatre at Home* series, which made 16 productions from the

UK's National Theatre available to watch for free on YouTube for a week at a time. Viewed over 15 million times in nine million households across 173 countries (National Theatre, 2020), *National Theatre at Home* became nothing short of a global arts phenomenon, exceeding even the reach of the *National Theatre Live* programme, which has broadcast plays to cinemas across the world since 2009. Aiming to provide theatre that does not only entertain, but that is “challenging and inspiring” (National Theatre, n.d.), the National Theatre has always also been an educational institution - supporting schools with educational resources and their large-scale youth theatre scheme, *NT Connections* (Busby, 2019). The plays that were selected for *NT at Home* also reflected their mission's pedagogical dimension, including innovative takes on Shakespeare's most performed plays (an anarchic production of *A Midsummer Night's Dream* deserves particular mention), stage adaptations of classic Victorian novels (*Frankenstein* and *Jane Eyre*) and political satire targeting both historical and modern wielders of power (*The Madness of King George* and *This House*).

When, in late May, our collective attention shifted - however briefly - away from the virus and towards the resurgence of the Black Lives Matter movement which was sparked by the murder of George Floyd, three of the NT at Home series' plays emerged as especially resonant with the current moment, speaking to our zeitgeist with a heightened urgency: *Small Island*, *The Barber Shop Chronicles*, and the series' final production, *Les Blancs*. All three plays tackle questions of race, imperialism and colonialism and explore how the complex power relations that underpin them manifest themselves in various historical and geographical contexts.

When it was first performed in 2019, in the aftermath of the Windrush scandal, *Small Island* was hailed as “one of

the most important plays of the year” (Billington, 2019). It tells the story of a Jamaican couple’s arrival in postwar Britain, in particular their interactions with a white British couple. It relates their experiences with warmth and humanity, without failing to portray the blatant and pervasive racism that members of the Windrush generation experienced both during and after the war. The play was adapted from Andrea Levy’s widely acclaimed eponymous novel, which in 2007 was selected for a large-scale national reading event to commemorate the 200-year anniversary since the abolition of the slave trade. This, along with a BBC TV adaptation have secured its status within the canon of postcolonial literature. It has, however, also been criticized for giving equal space to Queenie and Bernard (the white British couple) as to Hortense and Gilbert (the Jamaican couple), thus ensuring that “white British voices remain central to this black British story” (Carroll, 2014). Although the play reproduces this bias in the novel’s narrative structure, it is at its most emotionally engaging in its portrayal of the injustices Hortense and Gilbert face in Britain, and the determination with which they nonetheless set out to make a life for themselves there.

While *Small Island* taps into the ongoing (and increasingly exacerbated) debate about who is and is not allowed to come and to remain in the UK, *Barber Shop Chronicles* is in itself a cultural artefact of this debate. Its playwright, Inua Ellamas, whose family fled from Nigeria when he was a child, has lived in the UK for twenty years, yet has to date not been granted a permanent right to stay (Bull, 2018). The play, set in barber shops across six cities in six countries; London, Johannesburg, Harare, Kampala, Lagos and Accra, is based on interviews Ellamas conducted in each of these cities, and illustrates barber shops' vital role as a safe space for black men to discuss politics, identity,

masculinity, family and relationships. With a network of geographically dispersed characters who are revealed to be connected on multiple levels - family ties, football club allegiances, and shared experiences - the play testifies to our increasingly transnational existences and identities. Where *Small Island* complicates the relationship between the colony and the “motherland” by drawing our attention to the stark contrast between the expectations of the Jamaicans arriving to Britain and the harsh reality they encounter there, *Barber Shop Chronicles* questions the very dualism of the centre versus the periphery, substituting this traditionally bipolar world with a multipolar one. It is a world on the move, as is illustrated by the play’s fast-paced dialogues, energized hip hop dance interludes, and continuous references to people migrating and mingling across countries and continents. Ultimately, as Ellamas has stated himself, the play is reclaiming and rewriting the overwhelmingly negative existing narrative about black men by “inviting the world into our own space, on our own terms” (Collins-Hughes, 2019).

Like Ellamas, Lorraine Hansberry used theatre to critically address the representation of black men. Her play, *Les Blancs* was a direct response to Jean Genet’s play *The Blacks* and to two essays by Norman Mailer, criticised by Hansberry for what she called their “new paternalism” - an attitude towards black men which claimed to be anti-racist by glorifying their perceived hypermasculinity and excessive sexuality, but which in fact reproduced racist ideologies that viewed black men as inherently violent (Burrell, 2014). *Les Blancs*, despite being set in a fictional African country at the brink of a war of independence, is just as much an allegory of race relations in the USA as it is about imperialism and colonialism, and one of its greatest achievements lies in drawing clear parallels between the two. These parallels

crystallize in the conversations between Tshembe Matoseh, the village chief's son who has returned to his home country and is contemplating joining the independence movement, and Charlie Morris, a white American journalist. Morris accuses Matoseh of not wanting to move on from past injustices to find common ground with the colonizers. Meanwhile, Matoseh points out that although white liberals might recognize racism as a "fraudulent device" that is used to maintain power, they will never experience the device's deadly reality. However, Hansberry does not dismiss the notion of being a "white ally" as entirely inconceivable. As the play progresses, and as the characters' complex relationships and the extent of the violence committed by the colonizers become evident, she makes clear that there is a need for radical action and commitment to social justice on both sides, and that women play a crucial role in putting this to practice (Wilkerson, 1972).

It is perhaps due to the fact that it was originally written at the height of the civil rights movement, to which Black Lives Matter traces a direct heritage, that *Les Blancs* felt the most pertinent to our current moment, in spite of it being first performed half a century ago. Hansberry's use of a fictional setting (allowing her to retain a critical distance to her subject matter whilst simultaneously highlighting its universality), and the quasi-didactic dialogues her characters engage in, have provoked comparisons to Brecht's epic theatre (Barrios, 1996). Brecht's notion of "alienation" is certainly worth revisiting in the context of *National Theatre at Home* and other virtually mediated live performances - for example, how does the experience of watching an audience watch a performance affect our own sense of being alienated from the play? It is also worth remembering that for Brecht, the goal of theatre was for the audience to leave a performance inspired to take political

action (Brecht, 1953). To this end, he devised increasingly participatory forms of theatre, culminating in his *Lehrstücke* (translated by Brecht as “learning-plays”), which erased the boundary between audience members and actors entirely (Jameson, 1998) - comparable to Augusto Boal’s notion of “spectactors” in his *Theatre of the Oppressed* (1993). Arguably, *National Theatre at Home* embodies the very opposite of this experience, with audience members not even sharing the same physical space as actors. Nonetheless, the series’ regular schedule and limited availability, the possibility for audience members to react to plays and interact with each other via YouTube and other social media platforms, and perhaps above all the individual plays’ timeliness, all contributed towards something akin to the “concentrated co-presence” (Sullivan, 2018, p.59) and the “community of perception” (Wardle, 2014) that are so essential to theatre. In our hyper-digitalized world, in which an endless stream of arts and entertainment is always available to be consumed instantly, this is no easy feat. *National Theatre at Home* helps us imagine new possibilities for experiencing art that bring us together in meaningful ways, spark conversations about social change, and perhaps even inspire the kind of radical action Hansberry envisioned when writing *Les Blancs*. One thing is certain: the continued importance of the arts in helping us make sense of our physically confined, but in other ways endlessly connected realities, and as a catalyst for anti-racist, socially transformative education.

References

Billington, M. (2019, May 2). *Small Island review – Levy’s Windrush epic makes momentous theatre*. The

Guardian.

<https://www.theguardian.com/stage/2019/may/02/small-island-review-andrea-levy-windrush-national-theatre-london>

Boal, A. (1993). *Theater of the Oppressed*. New York: Theatre Communications Group.

Brecht, B. (1953). Kleines Organon für das Theater. *Versuche*, 12 : 106-140.

Bull, J. (2018). Nation, nationhood and theatre [introduction to special issue]. *Journal of Contemporary Drama in English*, 6(1):1-14.
http://eprints.lincoln.ac.uk/id/eprint/31746/1/31746%20jcde-2018-0008_v1.pdf

Busby S. (2019) 'The Biggest Youth Theatre Festival on the Planet': National Theatre Youth Connections. In M. Finneran & M. Anderson (Eds.), *Education and Theatres. Landscapes: the Arts, Aesthetics, and Education*. Cham: Springer.
https://doi.org/10.1007/978-3-030-22223-9_8

Carroll, R. (2014). *Small Island*, Small Screen: Adapting Black British Fiction. In J. Baxter & D. James (Eds.). *Andrea Levy: Contemporary Critical Perspectives*. London: Bloomsbury Academic.

Jameson, F. (1998). *Brecht and method*. London: Verso.

Sullivan, E. (2018). The Audience Is Present: Aliveness, Social Media, and the Theatre Broadcast Experience. In P. Aebischer, S. Greenhalgh & L.E. Osborne (Eds.).

Shakespeare and the 'Live' Theatre Broadcast Experience. London: The Arden Shakespeare. Retrieved October 13, 2020, from <http://dx.doi.org/10.5040/9781350030497.ch-003>

National Theatre. (n.d.) *About the National Theatre*. <https://www.nationaltheatre.org.uk/about-the-national-theatre>

National Theatre. (2020, July 23). *Relive the Memories | 16 World-Class Productions | National Theatre at Home* [Video]. YouTube. https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=k_HhFCFMNr4

Wardle, J. (2014). 'Outside Broadcast': Looking Backwards and Forwards, Live Theatre in the Cinema—NT Live and RSC Live. *Adaptation*, 7(2): 134–153, <https://doi.org/10.1093/adaptation/apu017>

Wilkerson, M. (1972). Introduction. In R. Nemiroff (Ed.), *Lorraine Hansberry: The Last Collected Plays*. New York: New York American Library.

Kirstin Sonne
University of Glasgow